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THE EMPLOYMENT PROBLEM IN INDUSTRY¹

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In a recent conversation with an employer who had under his care over 4,000 men and women in the large factory he directed, he said in substance that when expenditures were made for machinery or materials they were given care that was too much neglected when the matter was one of employing men and women. In buying machines thought was given to the question whether each machine was that which was best suited to its work, whether it had strength sufficient, and whether it was in all ways suited to do what was to be required of it. Experts were employed to advise upon the matter, and much time and money were spent as a matter of course to determine all the facts in order that the investment in the machine might be made wisely. The same was true, he said, as regards materials. They were bought from carefully prepared specifications and thorough tests were made to determine whether the goods were as represented. The specifications themselves were the result of long study to find that material best suited for the purpose.

The gentleman then proceeded to point out that in employing men and women these various things were conspicuous by their absence; that nothing like the same amount of care was usually given to securing the man that was bestowed upon buying the machine or the materials upon which the machine was to work. My acquaintance thought the whole process was incomplete and that we had stopped with one of the most important things left quite undone. He felt that the art of employment was worthy of thought and study as truly as the business of buying, and that there was the same sound reason for having an employment manager that existed for having a purchasing agent and at least as great need for care in the performance of the duties of the one as of the other.

In the business with which I was myself long connected, I was

¹Revision of remarks before the Employment Managers' Conference, Minneapolis, January 20, 1916.

a spectator of, rather than a participant in, the process of employing, for my own work lay chiefly in the selling department of the business. The head of the house, however, considered it of importance to give his personal care so far as was possible to the matter of employment. He did not like to discharge men. It was his policy not to do so, and therefore he would say the more care was needed in employing them because he hoped not to let them go. This policy was carried out with remarkable success. The force so employed was in many respects a picked one. The changes in it were relatively few, and rarely was a man discharged for cause. The business grew from a small to a large one, and the definite policy of giving special care to the matter of employment proved in every respect successful.

I have always felt that the last concern in the world with which I should want to compete would be that which paid high wages, which sold the best quality of goods, and which had such management as to lead its men upward all the time. I have never found any difficulty, as a salesman, in competing with a cheap shop. The product of a cheap shop is likely to include a large quantity of seconds, and is not usually as large as where men are well paid.

I think I can give you an example of the economy of good wages and good treatment in the case of a factory employing women which I have in mind. In it there are a thousand working girls, 500 each in two rooms. They earn as a minimum wage about one half more than the girls in other mills nearby employing women. As a maximum they earn almost or quite double what other mills pay girls. The conditions of employment are such that the ladies here might wear their white dresses going through the factory, without danger of soiling them. I took my wife there to see it. As a result of those conditions, and of careful selection in employment, with much attention paid to the human value in the shop, that factory sold its goods before the war against the competition of Germany, England and France, in fifty countries all over the world.

My feeling about the fundamental policy of employment is that we often stop short in our thinking. We buy a machine, you and I. We are, as I have suggested, very careful about that machine. In the first place we do not buy the machine unless we understand it. There is not one of us here who would think of

putting an apparatus into our office or shop that we did not understand. That means that we have given attention to the laws of that machine. We know what it can do. We should consider ourselves very, very absurd if we put into our factory any apparatus about which we could say that we had not studied its laws, and did not know how it operated, what its capacity of output might be, to what extent it would bear overstrain. You would not run a paper machine in a dusty place. A man would be considered foolish, to say the least, to do that; and there are other delicate machines which you are especially careful to keep dry, and in other respects to keep guarded and cared for. How many of us apply the same kind of thinking to the man or the woman we take into our shops, so infinitely more complex a machine than the loom or the shaper or the planer or the paper machine, an infinitely more complex thing with all sorts of qualities to which most of us pay no attention. In fact, there is a word we use in that connection which by its very use shows the limitation of our thought. We say we employ so many "hands." The very use of the word shows that we do not appreciate the situation. We are not employing "hands"; we are employing brains and hearts and dispositions, and all sorts of elements that make for personality—we are employing them all.

Now, if there is one neglected thing in the employment problem, it is the human capacity for responsiveness. We are all of us perfectly familiar with the human capacity for destructiveness. We feel that ourselves. We do not like it when we are made to do something which was not in the bond. We do not like it, you and I in the office, sitting at our comfortable desks, when something is put up to us to do that was not in the bond of employment. We resent it when we are told to do it under conditions of hardship, with no account being taken of fatigue, or of our physical capacity for the particular thing we are asked to do, with no thought of the infinite complexity of the human element employed. It is the darkest kind of blundering and blindness that too many of us use. Here is a man with all sorts of initiative along certain lines; he can handle a lathe, perhaps, to perfection; but because he was employed as a grinder, for which he has no aptitude at all, we keep him as a grinder. The idea of selection in many of our shops and offices is almost unknown; but a man who is no good at one thing is assumed,

therefore, to be good at nothing, and out he goes, without thought, into the world. About the saddest thing in industry is the fearful procession of the incompetent, who enter and go out of our great mills. But almost as sad a sight is the alleged brain of the superintendent who lets that sort of thing go on indefinitely.

I have in mind two factories, twelve miles apart, in the same line of business. In one of them were perfect equipment, modern buildings and light, and everything physically fine; but the owner of that mill stated to me that he could not get respectable help at any price; and he had signs in many languages in the mill because he had many racial types of help. Twelve miles away in another mill, whose buildings were all that such buildings should not be, no two of them on the same level, whose plant would be an interesting study for the archaeologist, the owner said to me, "I wish you would come down into the factory yard; I want you to see our working girls." I went down in the yard, and he had good reason to be proud of the girls, largely American born, a very fine looking lot of young women. These mills were only twelve miles apart, in the same state. In the factory that I spoke of a moment ago, where there were a thousand workers, it has happened more than once that mothers of wayward daughters would bring them to the superintendent and ask if he would take them into the mill, that they might have the benefit of the influence of the good girls working in that mill. On the office desk in those works stands a silver vase, presented to the owner, when 80 years of age, by the entire working force of the factory. This is only forty miles away from some of our great mill centers where that which takes place is sad as regards the sweetness and purity and dignity of womanhood.

I took Mr. Roosevelt through one of these factories of which I speak, one day, and he talked to a man named Henry. Henry called another Henry whom he introduced as his son. He said, "I expect in a few years we will have the third Henry here—my grandson—who is just growing up and he is coming into the shop." A very interesting object lesson of what was hoped to take place—three generations at work in the same factory at the same time.

A great deal is said of welfare work in our factories, and under this head much is done that thoughtful people must admire, and, so far as they may, emulate. There is a feature of so-called wel-

fare work, however, which has objectional phases. I do not think it is wise for employers to impose their own ideals of welfare upon their employees. I do not think that any amount of welfare work can ever take the place of a righteous wage or compensate for its absence. A beautiful hospital in the shop does not make good a scanty purse in the home. This is not a slap at hospitals but a slap at the scanty purse. If the purse is properly filled and the hospital is needed, by all means let us have both. The first and foremost welfare work is the payment of a living wage.

It seems to me that the sound philosophy for welfare operations is to proceed *pari passu* with the developing desires of the employees for them. I do not quite know why I have the right to impose my ideas as to sanitation and cleanliness upon others. There is of course the privilege of reasoning on these matters, and the power of courteous argument is a proper one at almost all times and places. It is rather a different thing, however, for me to put my own personal standards in those respects, however good, into such physical form that they are substantially enforced upon others without their desire or choice. A good example of these respects is wholly admirable, but I sometimes think there has been a little bit too much in some cases of the attitude that the workman needed to be taught about these matters by his wiser master and thus be brought to a better standard of living. Perhaps it may be true, but it may not be altogether pleasant or wise to put it in just that way. These things are matters of growth, of education, of evolution, and permanent results are more safely had if the evolution of welfare facilities proceeds step by step with the evolution of the appreciation of them and the desire for them on the part of those for whose good they are intended.

The process I suggest is slow. It is not spectacular. It has little or no advertising value. But it would mean that master and man grew together side by side, and it is consistent with peace and with mutual self respect. Let us meet men fully half way, but let us not try to impose upon them our own ideals, for even if ours are the better ideals they will resent them if imposed from above, and I think they ought to do so.

I heard of a man who gave a splendid clubhouse to his working girls. It was his idea and he meant it in a broad spirit of kindly

helpfulness. The girls used it with much interest for some months. Then it was not used so much, and the use grew less and less. The employer thought the girls ungrateful. A fellow manufacturer said:

No, they are not ungrateful. The clubhouse is not their clubhouse. It is your clubhouse. They do not want your conception of what they need imposed upon them. They would be thankful for your meeting their real needs, the first of which is a sufficient wage to keep them self-respecting in the world, after which, so far as you can go with them, meeting their viewpoint, well and good, but never impose on them your own idea of what they need. It is not human nature to **like that.**